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County to hire consultant on new gas plant pollution

Turbines may produce 4M tons of greenhouse gas

Plans are apparently continuing to move forward to build a natural gas power plant in the area of Blue on land owned by Sandow Lakes Ranch (SLR). The plant's developers, Sandow Lakes Energy, have applied for air quality permits with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. The application reportedly shows the plant would be capable of emitting nearly 4 million tons per year of greenhouse gases.

During a meeting of the Lee County Commissioners Court on Oct. 28, Judge Frank Malinak and the commissioners agreed to hire an environmental engineering consultant in order to get a better understanding of the impact of the proposed natural gas power plant.

"Everybody's seen all the stories in the media about the Blue natural gas power plant," said Judge Malinak. "We just want to hear from an independent scientist what these numbers actually represent. We can look at these figures that were submitted with SLR's application to the TCEQ, but it certainly doesn't tell me anything. For instance, what does a 'ton' of carbon dioxide really mean?"

"An independent scientist could give us some information on whether this is going to be a really dirty plant, a cleanly run plant, or what have you," Malinak told the court. The county has already put some feelers out to an individual with a globally known company called Worley that specializes in engineering consulting.

Commissioner Steven Knobloch asked if the consultant would also be looking at the noise the plant might generate. "I'm sure the people in Blue are concerned about it," he stated. "Are they going to be able to sleep without hearing a roar?"

"There's a lot of issues our citizens are concerned about," Malinak responded. "Pollution is the big one. Others are how their quality of life will be affected -- noise, light pollution, decreasing property values -- things like that."

When asked how much this consultant would cost the county, Malinak said that he did not know what she might charge. "She won't know until she looks at the situation and makes an assessment," he noted. "If the engineer comes in wanting too much money, we'll decline." County Attorney Martin Placke told the court that such services aren't cheap. "You're not paying for an opinion, you're paying for advice," he said. "Realistically, I think you're looking at \$15,000 to \$20,000."

Other avenues

Malinak reminded the court that the TCEQ is still planning on holding a public hearing on the matter in Lexington, though the date is still to be determined.

In the meantime, a citizen's group called "Move the Gas Plant" is pursuing other methods to stop the plant from being built in Blue. Some of the group's members have criticized Judge Malinak and the court for not taking decisive action to stop the plant, or at least adopting a resolution giving a proverbial thumbs-down to the plant.

"Contrary to what the folks up in Blue who are leading the charge to move the power plant believe, we don't think it ought to be there in the center of the population, either," Malinak said. "But we don't have the authority to stop it."

Commissioner Mark Matthijetz asked, "Is there anything that can be said or done by anybody if TCEQ approves the permit?"

"All we can speak about is the county," replied Placke. "The Blue group may have a different opinion whether something could be done."

"We just want somebody to tell us if this is something we need to be concerned about," interjected Malinak. Placke agreed. "This way you can get an independent opinion on the information that's been filed as opposed to taking whatever SLR or Move the Power Plant says at face value,"

he said. “They both could be right, or both could be wrong – we don’t know. I don’t think any of us have the knowledge to know exactly what this is going to lead up to.”

Making the move

“I’d like to get rolling on this,” concluded Malinak. “We’ve got SLR on one side, and Move the Gas Plant on the other. We’re in the middle. One side perceives it’s going to be a good thing, and the other perceives it’s going to be a bad thing -- that’s the issue.”

Commissioner Alan Turner moved to approve appointing the consultant and setting the cap at \$25,000. Commissioner Richard Wagner seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Known pollutants

A watchdog group called Oil & Gas Watch News says that Sandow Lakes Energy’s TCEQ permit application shows that the plant would be capable of emitting nearly 4 million tons per year of greenhouse gases. That is reportedly comparable to emissions from more than 847,000 vehicles driven for a year. The plant could also emit up to 250 tons per year of nitrogen oxides and nearly 89 tons per year of volatile organic compounds, both of which are smog-forming pollutants that are thought to contribute to asthma attacks and long-term lung damage.

The facility could also emit up to nearly 152 tons per year of fine particle pollution, which can reportedly trigger heart attacks, along with more than 165 tons per year of carbon monoxide.